

Turn EQ into the

Rippin Vig explores the importance of emotional intelligence in being successful in today's professional services environments.

AI is going to take over the world! A dramatic statement which usually prompts a robust discussion about how soon machine technology will be able to replicate human thinking. It's an interesting debate though you will be pleased to know it's not one I propose to explore here. I mention it, however, because the most interesting element of it for me is the belief that what will keep human beings ahead of the game is the difficulty a machine will have in replicating our emotional intelligence.

There has long been a requirement to demonstrate ability to undertake a job through qualifications and training. Of course, it is essential that we have the basic skills to do our jobs but, increasingly, the ability to read and regulate our own emotions in the workplace is becoming as important, if not more so, in assessing true ability to undertake a job.

There is now a body of evidence which shows that emotional intelligence, which is known as EI or EQ, has overtaken IQ in determining outstanding work performance. Put simply, you can be technically brilliant, but if you can't read, understand and act on your own emotions and the emotions of others, your progress in today's working world will be limited.

Professional services has always been a people business and, while we are relying on tech solutions more so now than ever, it remains about people and how we interact with each other – inside and outside of our organisations.

What is EQ?

EQ is the ability to perceive, evaluate and control emotions. It is a set of skills, which unlike IQ can be learned and improved, which helps us to improve our social competence in interpersonal relationships.

According to Daniel Goleman, one of the leading authorities on the subject,



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there are five elements which comprise our emotional intelligence:

- Emotional self-awareness – knowing what we feel at any given time and understanding how those emotions impact others
- Self-regulation – controlling or directing those emotions
- Motivation – using emotions to learn and achieve goals
- Empathy – sensing the emotions of others
- Social skills – managing relationships and inducing desired responses.

I am by no means any sort of expert on the topic, but in 20 years of working in professional services organisations, almost exclusively law firms, being able to operate successfully in this environment requires a broad range of skills. We need to be able to work harmoniously with peers, manage direct reports, manage the expectations of those we report into and, of course, be able to deal with partners many of whom are owners of the business and are themselves at the top of their game. Whilst the situations will be different and the personalities most certainly different depending on circumstances, the ability to read emotions and regulate our own responses are key. Setbacks are commonplace and how we deal with them determines future success.

Collaboration

Collaboration may seem to be a buzzword of the moment, but it is essentially about working with others some of whom we may not want to work with. Working with others is not a new concept and it can be challenging. Almost everything we work on requires some degree of collaboration with others, but we don't get to choose our colleagues and most of the time, we probably don't really know what's going on with someone which may affect their mood or the quality of their work.

There's no 'I' in Team

We often hear this phrase, a reference to the notion that being a good team member is not about the individual.

To a certain degree, however, it is about the individual. To operate as a team, individuals need to be aware of how their behaviour impacts on others and on the spirit of the team itself.

The reality of working in professional services is that we are surrounded by stress-inducing factors – deadlines, unexpected work and systems failures are obvious ones, but what about the effect of other people's emotions on us? Emotions really are contagious so if one person is reacting to a situation in a particular way, that reaction will affect the mood of others and possibly how they also react to it. Negative reactions create an unhealthy culture.

So if we are all subject to stress, how is it that some people seem to be on a more even keel? We all know that person who seems to be unflappable. These people aren't immune to stress or the emotions of others, but they are almost certainly more tuned into their own emotions which helps them to regulate their reactions.

Being able to regulate our response is critical to working with others and this is down to how much emotional intelligence we have; the ability to recognise how we

new IQ

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are feeling and then regulate that action requires a good deal of self-awareness and objective assessment to exercise self-control and adapt our reactions to the situation in hand.

We are all familiar with the concept of ‘counting to ten’ when encountering a stressful situation. This is worthwhile and can also be useful when faced with a suggestion or comment from someone in the office with which we disagree. Asking for time to consider the suggestion made by the other person is another option, but if an immediate response is required and we disagree with it, disagree agreeably – if we are open to the other opinion, it is possible that open mindset will help temper our reaction and make them more conciliatory and open to our perspective. This approach helps to foster an open conversation and demonstrates maturity and a willingness to co-operate with others, which will make others more willing to co-operate too.

Demonstrating an ability to self-regulate our own behaviour can also act as a reminder to others that they should do the same.

Influence

We are all influenced by the actions of others, but we are also heavily influenced by the emotions of others. As mentioned in the previous section, emotions are contagious which can lead to a negative spiral, but if emotions are contagious that also means positive emotions are contagious and can lead to a spiral of optimism and success.

As marketers, we are often the group seeking to push the boundaries to try new approaches, for example, introducing new ideas for thought leadership and marketing campaigns, using social media more effectively, or implementing new approaches to client development. This can be hugely exciting and challenging at the same time. As an area of the business

where success heavily depends on our ability to influence people and outcomes, we can harness our EQ skills to project positive emotions and carefully considered approaches to move the business in ways which will ultimately benefit it.

We all know someone who is good at persuading others to their view. Some common traits they share include an ability to assess the person’s likely reaction, frame their position in a way which demonstrates an understanding of the other person’s views and anticipate questions they may be faced with. They all seem to be able to achieve the outcome they desire, or close enough.

Being able to do this requires empathy. Empathy is at the heart of influ-

encing because it demonstrates that we understand the other person’s position. The ability to empathise with someone is crucial to building rapport, which in turn fosters trust – a foundation for influencing. It is important that we establish rapport with those we work with because it helps us to improve our personal relationships with others, in turn making them more open to our suggestions. This is why, even in business cultures which are considered to be less relationship-dependent, people engage in a couple of minutes of ‘small-talk’ at the beginning of a meeting, also described as ‘breaking the ice’ and, within the EQ glossary, also known as building rapport.

This does, of course, assume that others want to engage in small-talk and we all know that partners are busy people and not all of them may seem approachable. It can also be challenging to find something in common if you are junior and you are meeting with a senior. Being professional and doing a good job will, of course, help to foster trust from partners and others we need to influence.

Managers and fellow team members can also help by identifying the things which the person in question cares about so that you can tailor your discussion to the areas you know will retain their interest. This may include insight on how ideas should be presented. If the person likes detail and evidence, go in with some data to support your position. If they are bigger picture, consider pulling them into your plan with a concept.

Spending some time considering how to get someone on board is worthwhile because very often it is not the idea which fails to influence, but the approach.

Resilience

There is a saying that the only things in life which are certain are death and taxes. We should add failure to that list. It’s a great feeling when a plan comes together

Collaboration

Trust and openness are at the heart of good collaboration. This includes:

- Sharing knowledge – we learn most of our jobs on the job so having strong relationships across the team with everyone willing to share will foster learning. And this should be encouraged both ways from juniors to seniors as much as the other way around.
- Taking responsibility for our tasks
- Working in a way which makes the team look good
- Taking time out to make a personal connection to establish rapport and foster an environment which is open and in which everyone feels safe to speak out.

Remote working

Most of us have or are still working remotely. This can present additional challenges to working with others and influencing them because the setting is more informal – you and they are at home – and even if you are using video, it can be more difficult to pick-up on some non-verbal cues that are more apparent in-person. These challenges can be viewed positively, however:

- The unprecedented effects of the coronavirus and the enforced social distancing measures which have resulted give us a “we are all in it together” feeling. This is a good foundation for camaraderie with team mates and may make some of your partners feel a little less scary to approach as they are likely to be as uncertain of the future as the next person.
- Try and use video calls in an effort to retain some non-verbal cues. These can also be opportunities to share our personal situations which can bring us closer to colleagues. For example, one of our team meetings was interrupted by someone’s dog and that encouraged others to show their dogs, giving us all a reason to laugh and interact with each other.
- For many people, working at home for long periods is new and can be stressful. We miss out on social, human interaction so demonstrating empathy for those who may be struggling with the lack of human interaction can go a long way to building rapport.



and we can all go home at the end of the day knowing it was a job well done. But things do go wrong and how we deal with setbacks is important to our ability to operate effectively. Resilience is our ability to bounce back.

Most people fall into the category of those who will be knocked back by failure, but after a reasonable period will pick themselves up. Learning to identify our own feelings in the face of a problem and regulating our reactions is an important skill which impacts on how well we can continue to work with others and be successful in our roles once the incident has taken place.

Often when something goes wrong, our initial reaction may be to blame someone else. That is not helpful if we want to continue to work with the person in question. Thankfully, in the corporate world, time and money may be at risk but lives generally aren’t so there is usually time to take stock and work out a solution. Most organisations are also incredibly forgiving when it comes to failure. Provided we learn from the situation, it can actually become a positive experience in the long run so there should never be a need to point fingers and risk our working relationships.

It is also worth remembering that we won’t encounter many major failures and, in fact, what can be detrimental to our working lives are the minor setbacks we all encounter on a regular basis: a grumpy colleague speaks in a way we find upsetting or annoying or we discover that someone has acted in a way which makes us question their motives. These ‘minor’ things can impact our emotions to some extent more than a large-scale failure

because many of us ruminate over them which turns them into something greater than they ever were – what was said, who did what, why, is there a conspiracy?

These ‘minor’ things can end up taking up a great deal of our headspace which can impact on our effectiveness at work and impact our personal lives.

Being resilient in the face of these setbacks can make us far more able to maintain strong relationships and succeed in our work. We can build our own resilience through a positive outlook and through the creation of strong working relationships which help us to navigate difficult and stressful times. There are a number of stress-management techniques which can be deployed either immediately such as removing yourself from the situation or deep breathing and other longer term measures which help us to recover more fully such as taking holidays, switching off from work at the weekends and having hobbies or taking exercise. Different things work, but the important thing is to find some things which do.

Conclusion

The benefits of improving our emotional intelligence are huge. From an individual perspective, they include a fulfilled working (and personal) life with strong relationships, headspace to focus on being creative and successful and sufficient levels of resilience to deal with stress.

From a business perspective, providing training and support to improve EQ is worth considering to improve culture and talent retention as studies show that teams comprising individuals with high levels of EQ consistently outperform those with less. A cohesive and productive workforce is great for business and for those of us who manage teams. It makes life as managers and leaders much easier if we are managing emotionally intelligent individuals, but the bonus is that managers can also draw a great sense of well-being when their teams are working together openly and constructively. I know I do.

And who doesn’t want to benefit from working in a positive, harmonious and open environment?



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